



Cities, from spheres of power to providers of competence, services, care and resilience

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The gender gap in public space

Previously, in Europe, men were the main producers of goods and services in the city. They would go out to conduct business meetings with other men. Thus they would influence and decide the design of public space and public buildings, deliver speeches, appoint confidants, and prepare laws with their inner circles, holding power in Parliament, and so on. But not women. They were not welcome in Houses of Parliament, universities or as spectators, not even in cabarets.

The city became the centre of activity and employment where men would move about in coaches or cars on streets which often were not be equipped with sidewalks. When middle and upper class women would go out however, they would always need to be accompanied by a chaperon, or house-keeper, or a brother or uncle. Poor women could only venture out at their own risk and peril. Combined, eventually all this led to a very masculine perception of urban public space and its purpose.

Women being delegated to concentrate on domestic activities, raise the children and organise the household, their place in the city was limited to cultural and shopping areas. Given these specific, male-imposed activities, women mainly resided in the suburbs or residential areas. This in turn would generate the softer perception of the suburbs.

These segmented areas would induce the concept of 'separate spheres' for women and men, which continues to influence some thinking about "proper" gender roles today.

This conception of the divided gender roles into separate spheres included women's place was in the private sphere (family and home), men's place was in the public sphere (politics and business) which was becoming increasingly separate from home life as the industrial revolution progressed and furthermore in public, social and cultural life.

In 1963 Betty Friedan, discusses (in 'The Feminine Mystique') the architectural implications of this perception in the development of suburbs and their sociological consequences for women that had them almost exclusively concentrating on consuming goods and services. In Anglo-Saxon literature, this is also covered by authors like Marilyn French in the 'Women's Room', 1977.



This was further enforced by what is referred to as 'urban branding' where streets were named after heroic battles or achievements and their male protagonists, powerfully portrayed in statues, looking all-mighty on well-built horses, whereas the rare female statues often portray a mystical, caring or fictional character. This includes a.o. the Belgian nurse, Edith Cavell, who has statues, hospitals and streets named after her in Brussels, London, even in Port Louis (Mauritius) and several other places around the world.

In this respect the city brands itself as a center of power and ideology.

Moving from a centrally controlled environment to a multi-synergy with the surrounding environment to keep the areas safe and secure

When near the end of the 19th Century, overcrowding, disease and insecurity were responsible for much of the unrest in Paris, Georges-Eugène Baron Haussman (1809 - 1891) clearly conceived the role of urban planning as a way to master, surveil and control the circulation of people, goods and services. He took charge of implementing Napoleon III's (1808 - 1873) vast public works programme and ordered the demolition of crowded and unhealthy medieval neighborhoods, the building of wide avenues, parks and squares, the annexation of the suburbs surrounding Paris and the construction of new sewer systems, fountains and aqueducts, much of what today makes the glory of Paris.

The New Urban Agenda

Today, early 21st century, more and more cities have committed to combat climate change and reveal themselves gender inclusive, resilient and sustainable.

They facilitate life in the public realm to multiple age groups providing safe and openly accessible public and green space, better lighting, wider sidewalks, numerous benches, proximity services and facilities such as spaces for bicycles and prams.

In the field of active travel and gender, a series of objectively measured attributes have been identified that influence physical activity levels in older women and indicates low neighbourhood Socio Economic Status (SES), urban form and proximity to business and facilities as key influencers. In terms of neighbourhood SES, it can further be suggested that positively perceived security, safety, the availability of well maintained benches, green areas, good lighting, overall aesthetics, signage and way-finding may improve physical activity levels in several population groups specifically on the physical activity levels of older women. Men usually travel straight to a destination (round trip home – job), whereas women generally stop over at different places (home – caretakers - school – shop – job). Men are statistically more likely to be drivers, while women are more likely to use sidewalks, cycle paths, and public transport.

In short, considering the fact that men and women move about in the city quite differently, their specific needs differ as well.

To meet at least some of these needs, some pro-active cities like Stockholm, in 2015 brought in gender equal snow cleaning, pledging to make moving around the city on icy winter days just as safe for women as it is for men. To be sure, not easy to implement but snow and ice keep many at home and affect women more than men, as women walk and cycle more than men.

Here we observe the city evolving from a center of power and ideology to a provider of competence, services, care and resilience.

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